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ABSTRACT

Taking the viewpoint of the receiver, this paper explores some differences between interpersonal transactions people have with each other and with the mass media. After addressing an orientation held by many communication scholars that the process of mass communication and interpersonal communication differ only in degree, the paper focuses on a single aspect of the mass communication process--the media/person encounter. It then offers discussions of the following propositions: (1) the technology of mass media messages inherently limits the sensory integration potential for receivers; (2) receivers of mass media messages have no functional control over media sources; and (3) receivers of mass media messages have only limited or imaginary knowledge of media sources. Finally, it addresses several current research perspectives that can profit from this conceptual reorientation. (FL)

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RESEARCH IN MASS MEDIA AND FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION: BRIDGING THE GAP

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The purpose of this essay is to explore some differences between interpersonal transactions people have with each other and transactions people have with the mass media. The perspective of the essay is decidedly receiver oriented; that is, it seeks to explicate differences in the interpersonal process from the media-person interchange or transaction from the vantage point of the receiver. Further, it seeks to cast in a multivariate sense the elements in the media-person encounter which limit the audience member (receiver) from forming a transactional relationship with a media source. A media-person transaction must account in some way for alternatives in the communicative relationship based on the communicative interaction. As Burgoon and Ruffner note, "the essence of understanding the transactional nature of communication is to understand how any element in the process of communication can alter the entire communication relationship" (1977, p. 10).

The first portion of this paper addresses an orientation held by many communication scholars (including at one time the authors of this piece) that the differences between the process of mass communication and interpersonal communication are but differences in degree. Schramm's position is typical; "on the whole the similarities between the processes of mass and interpersonal communication are far greater than the differences" (1971, p. 50). By narrowly focusing on a single aspect of the mass communication process, the media-person encounter, it is hoped that continued research and thinking on

this topic will be stimulated. Three factors which are related to distinguishing media-person encounters from interpersonal encounters must be addressed from the perspective of the receiver: technology and sensory integration; receiver control of the source; and receiver knowledge of the source. Each of these three factors should be viewed as dimensions of a multi-dimensional construct, in may cases operating independently of one another. It is our position that the placement of intrapersonal communication and mass communication at opposite ends of a single continuum has resulted in masking the multifaceted nature of the differences between types of communicative encounters. The following three propositions will be dealt with individually: 1) The technology of mass media messages inherently limits the sensory integration potential for receivers; 2) Receivers of mass media messages have no functional control over media sources; 3) Receivers of mass media messages have only limited or imaginary knowledge of media sources. Finally, the authors will address several current research perspectives which can profit from this conceptual reorientation.

I. The technology of mass media messages inherently limits the sensory integration potential for receivers.

The human system is a homeokinetic one; that is, it is self-stimulating and self-perpetuating. Human sensory modalities are not dormant sensors waiting to be stimulated and affected by objects in the environment. Instead, the perceptual systems of the human body are searching systems, actively and constantly scanning the environment for information appropriate to the needs of the information processor (Gibson, 1966; Travers, 1970).

Seven modalities are of particular importance to those interested in the process of communication. These modalities are important because they have been isolated as systems which are processed by the brain in differential fashion because of their unique attributes. They are labeled Audio Verbal, Audio Nonverbal, Visual Verbal, Visual Pictoral, Olfactory, Tactile and Taste (see McCain and Arnold, 1972). One of the primary objects of the human information processor is to achieve sensory integration from and between the various modalities; to gain an understanding of a phenomenon by receiving complimentary information about the perceived object from varying modalities. As Travers notes, "the full experience of the environment requires that redundant information be experienced through the different perceptual systems" (1970, p.9). When an object is perceived which is lacking in information from one of the modalities, past experience from similar objects is used by the human system in order to gain a more complete understanding of the object. For example, all a person knows about a particular object in the environment is the word cat spoken by someone (audio verbal), a vague picture as to the nature of that feline is available to the information processor. If we hear the word cat and can hear the animal purr or meow (audio nonverbal), we have a more complete idea as to the nature of the animal. If we could see the cat in all its furriness (visual pictoral) and see C-A-T spelled out for us along with the purr and the spoken word, the complimentarity of the modalities begins to reduce even more uncertainty as to the nature of the animal we are encountering. To really understand the cat, however, we would need to touch its fur (tactile) smell

its litter box (olfactory) and perhaps lick its coat (taste). Then we would have even more complete sensory integration, and a maximum of uncertainty as to what the cat is all about.

Interpersonal encounters provide the maximum of sensory integration potential, for the participants afford interaction among living organisms which move, speak, emit paralinguistic cues, have texture, odor and taste. The modalities of the receiver constantly scan the other participant in an interpersonal encounter, seeking to integrate information from the varying sensory sources. The media-person encounter is inherently a different phenomenon.

Media are the result of technology. It is useful to define media as unique combinations of potential sensory integration constrained by their technology (McCain and Arnold, 1972). This technology has enabled the combining of potential cross modality checking with definite parameters. Each of the media includes in every message the potential use of a specific number of modality stimulae. Of the seven sensory modalities individuals use to scan their environment and reduce uncertainty, newspapers offer information which can be processed by only two modalities -- visual verbal and visual pictoral. These are the only modalities manipulable by a newspaper source. Radio offers audio verbal and audio nonverbal stimulation, while television holds the potential for providing four sensory sources -- visual verbal, visual pictoral, audio verbal and audio nonverbal. In fact, television offers more potential for sensory integration than either newspapers or radio, due to the technology of the medium. All media, however, have less potential for

sensory integration than does an interpersonal encounter. Westley and McLean noted that mass communication differs from interpersonal communication to the extent that, "the number of modalities tends to be minimized" (1957, p. 31).

The technological constraints on sensory integration potential results in a different task for the information processor in a media encounter than he or she finds in the interpersonal setting. People must either supply the missing sensory data from their past experience or "know" the object in question based on "incomplete" sensory data. While interpersonal encounters are often lacking in sensory integration as well, it is the participants and the social situation which determine and constrain the extent of sensory data available. In short, the potential for total integration is always present in the interpersonal setting, but in the media-person encounter, technology inherently inhibits this potential.

II. Receivers of mass media messages have little or no functional control over media sources.

Feedback is an element in most every communication model. It is a concept borrowed from cybernetics and engineering to help describe the human communication process. What is critical to understand about this element of the process is that functionally feedback is a control device, mechanism or phenomenon. Positive and negative feedback in a cybernetic sense provide information to the system as to how or if the system is reaching its goal. Feedback in a human communication sense is traditionally defined as the "response of a receiver to the source's message" (Burgoon and Ruffner, 1975, p. 81). The reason why this element is critical for human

communication is because feedback tells the source how his or her message is being processed. Most writers of human communication would have little problem with Burgoon and Ruffner's deleniation of feedback:

> The receiver may smile, frown, sigh, yawn, wiggle, nod the head in disagreement, and make a variety of verbal answers. These cues let the source know whether his or her message is being received; they are one of the most powerful means of control the receiver has (1975, p. 82). (emphasis added)

In order to understand the transactional nature of communication, we must recognize the extent to which participants can control the communicative situation. Feedback enables participants (both source and receiver) to adjust and change in order to fit the needs of the other participants. "Feedback is the link between source and receiver that gives communication its transactional nature" (Burgoon and Ruffner, 1975, p. 82). Feedback is important to the extent that change in the message decoding and encoding process is facilitated. It is feedback which informs the participants in a communicative transaction whether or not a "sharing of an orientation toward a set of informational signs" (Schramm, 1971, p. 13) is occurring.

It has long been recognized that in mass communication processes feedback is constrained. Westley and MacLean, for instance, noted that in mass communication "'orientative' feedback is minimized or delayed" (1957, p. 31). Burgoon and Ruffner are also representative when they refer to mass communication: "the feedback is limited, delayed and indirect compared to feedback in face-to-face communication" (1975, p. 338). The functional

consequences of this constrained feedback is the critical factor in distinguishing the media-person encounter from an interpersonal encounter.

Audience members learn quickly in their media-person encounters that they are unable to control the sources of mass media messages. No matter how much mass media audience members wiggle, talk, frown or smile, the media message does not adjust or change. Mass media technology limits an audience member from interacting directly with a media source in the vast majority of their encounters with the media. This is a phenomenon substantially different from the experiences of interpersonal encounters which people have with one another. Letter writing, phone calling or turning the TV set off are not the same as nonverbally or verbally correcting or guiding other participants in a transaction.

In order for media transactions to be more similar to interpersonal transactions, the audience member must perceive an opportunity to control what he or she sees and hears during the transaction itself. Without this opportunity the audience member can only use media messages as a source of information and as topics for communicative transactions with others over whom they can exercise some control. New technology, especially interactive cable, may change this. When audience members may interact and correct or change the course of the media message during the transmission, then an interpersonal model is being employed.

The fact that audience members have little or no functional control over the nature of the communicative transaction due to technology and the structure of mass media industries, makes mass media encounters substantially different from encounters people have with each other.

III. Receivers of mass media messages have only limited or "imaginary" knowledge of media sources.

A receiver in any communicative transaction brings to the encounter two kinds of orientations or predispositions. The first is an orientation toward the topic or subject of the transaction. Every individual orients to topics with varying degrees of prior knowledge, experience and attitudes. These predispositions are the result of past experience the participants have had with the topic under consideration. The second orientation is, of course, toward the other participant, or source. The perceived credibility of the other involved in any transaction is similarly based on past experiences in communicative encounters. The process a person goes through in the communicative enterprise has been called co-orientation by Chaffee and McLeod (Chaffee, McLeod and Guerrero, 1969; McLeod and Chaffee, 1973). Based on Heider and Newcomb, they argue that a person interprets messages and carries on a communicative transaction by continually co-orienting to both topic and other.

A number of factors concerning receivers' orientations toward media sources make the co-orientations toward media sources unique and substantly different than the interpersonal encounters people have with others.

1. The concept of media source is vague and highly variant to most receivers.

Viewers of television programs or readers of newspapers have at best a vague notion as to the source or originator of these messages. Is the source the producer, editor, writer, actor, television station, network, the

newspaper owner? Perhaps it is all of them. People engaged in media encounters perceive media sources in a highly varied manner. Some viewers of "All In the Family" think Archie is the source and orient to the character. Others may orient to Carroll O'Connor the actor; some may perceive Norman Lear to be the source, while others perceive it to be the local CBS affiliate. The important point is that in media encounters the receiver is faced with far more variation as to the possible source of the message than in interpersonal encounters. Interpersonally, people have fewer choices in perceiving who the source of the message "really" is.

2. Technology limits the kinds of sensory data people may obtain about media sources.

People do not know media sources as the result of total sensory integration. Receivers can only imagine or project how Walter Cronkite feels, smells or tastes. These sensory data are not available to them. It is even more constrained for newspaper readers and radio listeners. All sorts of missing sensory data demand that people compensate for this lack in a variety of ways. There are probably people in this audience today who are here in search of visual pictoral and audio non-verbal stimulae. Maybe even tactile, olfactory or taste data are being sought about authors they have never met. "What does Steve Chaffee or Gary Gumpert look like?" "I've read his stuff, but I've never met him." People need the maximum of sensory integration potential in order to co-orient to both topic and source. Technology inherently limits the information people have about media sources. This is in sharp contrast to the kinds of sensory data available in the interpersonal encounter.

3. Receivers of media messages tend to be functionally illiterate as to how media sources manipulate their credibility.

It is not our intent to summarize how perceived credibility can be controlled by a source. Most of the research in this area has been done in non-media settings. What is important to recognize is that the presentation of media sources requires message forms decidedly different than interpersonal message forms. Television requires that camera shots be taken to represent the "reality" of the source. Newspapers must print in varying type faces and sizes. The media industries encode their thinking in a stylized and limiting form in order to present to potential receivers, sources of varying credibility. For example, research has shown that such things as camera angle and image size effect the perceived credibility of media sources (McCain, Chilberg and Wakshlag, 1977; Avery and Long, 1976; McCain and Divers, 1973).

Most television viewers have little difficulty in determining the good guys from the bad guys or the protaganist from the heroine. This is true even when the sound is turned off and only the pictures are present. Audience members are, however, at a loss as to how they know who's good and bad. The conventions and methods employed by media sources to manipulate and control the projected images requires specialized knowledge about such things as lenses, editing, lighting, image size, music, camera movement, color and a host of other technical and aesthetic factors. Most participants in media encounters are functionally illiterate when it comes to decoding the grammar of visualization and presentation. Because of this, the knowledge people have

of media sources is often based on experiences and forms which are importantly different than those used by media sources to present themselves.

4. Media sources are assigned status by receivers due to their mere appearance in the media.

Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) referred to this phenomenon as status conferal. People who appear in the media tend to enjoy higher credibility and status because they have been "chosen" to appear before large numbers of people. This credibility bestowed on media sources confounds the relationship in the co-orientation process people have in the media person encounter.

While there may be other factors which influence the knowledge receivers have of media sources compared to interpersonal sources, these four collectively appear to make these differences substantial.

We have argued here that media-person encounters differ substantially from interpersonal encounters along three dimensions. First, interpersonal encounters allow for more sensory integration potential than any of the mass media. Second, because receivers in media encounters have no functional control of media sources like that which is available in interpersonal encounters, the concept of feedback in the two contexts is more than a difference of degree. Finally, the knowledge a receiver may have of a media source is inherently limited by technology and ranges of experience. This renders the co-orientation people have with topic and source to be different for media encounters than it is for interpersonal ones.

IV. Implications for Mass Communication Research

Our argument for a conceptual reorientation to the media-person encounter is supported by contemporary social scientists who are calling into question the American norm for judging successful interpersonal communication. According to communication educators, and any one of a host of interpersonal communication texts, effective interpersonal communication has a number of "universal" characteristics. These elements of good conversation have been described in a variety of ways, but sociologist Michael Schudson has summarized the American "conversational ideal "in the following five statements (1978, p. 323):

1) continuous feedback between two people in a face-to-face setting;
2) multichannel communications: one not only hears the conversational partner but sees and touches him or her;
3) spontaneous utterance: the content of the conversation is unique and created on the spot;
4) the same person acts at once as sender and receiver of messages;
5) the norms of the conversation are egalitarian: whatever rules of speaking (like alternation of speakers) govern one govern the other.

Just as Schudson and his colleagues effectively argue that these characteristics have no universal significance across cultures, it is our position that mass communication researchers must abandon this set of characteristics as the basis for describing and evaluating the media-person interaction.

By developing an entirely new "communication ideal" for the media-person encounter which is based upon the technological and functional realities of the mass media, we can begin to study mass communication within the context of its own norms and standards, rather than those imposed by demarcations along a single continuum. To assume that an interpersonal

paradigm provides an appropriate framework for the study of mass communication forces us to accept the basic premise that for many kinds of human interaction, the mass media are simply inferior. However, if our conceptual orientation focuses on the realities of the media-person interaction, we begin to recognize new functional alternatives which may have been previously hidden by the standards and ideals of the interpersonal perspective.

One line of inquiry which has given us new insights into the media-person encounter is research dealing with two-way or talk radio (Avery and Ellis, 1979; Avery, Ellis and Glover, 1978). The very fact that the interaction between call-in listeners and talk radio hosts more closely approximates the characteristics generally attributed to interpersonal communication enables us to begin bridging the gap in our understanding of face-to-face and media-person encounters.

Consistent with our growing dependence on mediated information, there exists today a general feeling among many individuals that we are becoming less and less informed about matters of central importance to our daily lives. Of equal concern to many is the belief that we are frequently unable to express our own opinions to those people who are in positions of authority and decision-making power. Individuals who face additional barriers to interpersonal relationships due to poor health, physical disability or geographical isolation have an even greater need to seek out alternative communication channels, especially those created by the electronic media.

Within this context, the interpersonal character of talk radio is especially significant. Talk radio is one of the few public media which allows

for spontaneous interaction between two or more people. The exchange of messages between a call-in listener and a talk radio host creates a pattern of talk which defines a symbol system for the interactants. That is, social reality is uniquely defined by the interactants, and hence becomes significant to the communication process.

After reviewing the results of several talk radio studies, one might easily come to the conclusion that although the communication patterns between a call-in listener and a talk radio host reveal numerous similarities to the face-to-face encounter, the unique characteristics imposed by this communication setting afford a special context which needs to be considered in order to develop a complete understanding of this particular media-person transaction.

The on-air presence of the talk radio host on a regular basis permits the listener to form a variety of opinions about this individual who is known only by his/her voice. The opportunity to witness the interaction patterns between the host and other callers without any personal threat to the listener enables him/her to prepare for a future media-person encounter. Even before the listener makes the conscious decision to initiate contact with the host, the impersonality of the medium allows the listener to use the information gleaned from the medium to facilitate interaction with others or to simply reinforce or expand existing ideas.

One of the reasons that the two-way format has proven more successful on radio than television is that the interaction is enhanced by the absence of the visual pictoral and visual verbal modalities. What might be considered

by some as a technological limitation of the radio medium actually contributes to this form of media-person interaction. In-depth interviews with selected call-in listeners revealed that not being able to see or even know what the host looked like (and vice versa) contributed greatly to the listener's level of relaxation and satisfaction with the media encounter.

Although the listening patterns of those who follow talk radio reveal a fairly faithful allegiance throughout the broadcast day, the vast majority of call-in listeners communicate directly with only one or two of the half dozen hosts employed by the station. Analysis of the interaction patterns between caller and host revealed that the majority of the conversation is spent reinforcing the opinions or positions of the interactants. The conclusion drawn from these findings is that talk radio functions to expose listeners to a variety of opinions and issues, but listeners are seldom willing to engage in interaction with hosts who hold a competing position. Even though callers selected hosts who shared a common perspective, interviewees frequently noted that they never forgot who was in control of the interaction. For some, being cut off for whatever reason represented a form of chastisement and humiliation which they found difficult to accept.

Hopefully, these examples drawn from talk radio research will serve to support the position that media-person encounters differ significantly from interpersonal encounters, even in the case of a highly specialized mass medium which embodies many of the characteristics of personal conversation. The talk radio listener is both constrained and aided by the technology of radio broadcasting and telephonic communications. When a

listener initiates contact with the talk radio host, he/she must remember that the interaction remains completely under the control of the host who can terminate the conversation at any time. Similarly, the caller's knowledge and understanding of the talk host and the radio station he/she represents is generally limited to the level of information which has been transmitted by the station to its listening audience.

There is evidence that this conceptual reorientation may already be having an indirect impact on the design of other mass communication research. For example, the growing literature dealing with conversational analysis argues for the abandonment of a priori rules in favor of generating structures from the observed communication content and its environment (Hawes, Avery and Ellis, 1977). An analysis of conversational styles within the interpersonal and mass communication settings has also revealed stylistic and temporal differences between interpersonal communication and interpersonal communication as it is depicted in television programming (Johnson and Davis, 1979). A recent synthesis of the literature concerning audio teleconferencing as a substitute for face-to-face conferencing not only shows evidence of a growing awareness on the part of researchers to establish norms and standards for successful teleconferencing, but also demonstrates some strengths and advantages inherent in mediated communication (Fowler and Jackson, 1978).

The suggestion that we need to consider a media-person paradigm in the design and execution of mass communication research is not offered at the total expense of the well-established interpersonal model. The early two-step flow and subsequent multi-step flow theories of information diffusion

provide ample support for the utility of an interpersonal orientation. Rather then discard one conceptualization in favor of the other, the interpersonal and media-person models should be viewed as companion orientations. The microscopic perspective developed in this paper serves only to introduce the media-person encounter without the traditional bias inherent in the interpersonal paradigm. One cannot move to a macroscopic level without recognizing the need to include the interpersonal perspective.

One final issue regarding this broad topic needs to be raised. Do receivers use an interpersonal model of communicative expectations when they encounter the media? Do people use a media model of communicative expectation when they engage in interpersonal transactions? Or, do people have one model of expectations for media encounters and another for interpersonal ones? Part of the answer to these questions may be uncovered in terms of age and differential experiences with the media. It may well be the case that those of us who developed our communicative style and expectations in a pre-television and pre-technological time, approach media encounters and interpersonal encounters far differently than the child born in the television and technology milieu of today. Because of this, the examination of interpersonal and media encounters must continue. Research On Personal Junctures with media and others need careful description and understanding.

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